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IN THIS ISSUE

PARSHA: TETZAVEH	1-3
ESTHER'S 2ND REQUEST	1,8
PURIM STORY	4-7
MEGILLA'S BLESSING	9

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Weekly Parsha

Tetzaveh

RABBI BERNIE FOX

The Function of Prophecy in the Resolution of Issues in Halachah

And you should make a Breast-plate of Judgment of a woven design. Like the design of the Ephod, you shall make it. You

(continued on next page)

ESTHER'S SECOND



REQUEST

RABBI DR. DARREL GINSBERG

The uniqueness of Megillas Esther lies not just in the fact that we were redeemed, but how our redemption was accomplished. Not through an outright miracle, such as during Pesach, nor through the bravery and valor of warriors, such as during Chanukah, but rather as a result of the sheer cunning of two leaders who utilized their knowledge and understanding of the human psyche to achieve one of the greatest victories in Jewish history.

As one reads through the story, it is astonishing how Esther maintains her composure throughout the crisis. Even more amazing is how precise her planning was, and how she was able to prey on the emotional insecurities of Achashverosh and the outsized ego of Haman to help reverse the edict. And even with Haman killed, and his position turned over to Mordechai, peril still existed for the Jewish people. Yet an almost different Esther emerges:

“And Esther spoke yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews (8:3)”

(continued on page 8)

(Tetzaveh cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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shall make it of gold, blue, purple, scarlet wool, and twisted linen. (Shemot 28:15)

The Kohen Gadol wore eight garments. These consisted of the four garments worn by every kohen and an additional four special vestments. One of the special vestments was the Choshen Mishpat – the Breast-plate of Judgment. The Choshen hung from the shoulders of the Kohen Gadol. The vestment was made of woven cloth. Embedded into the Choshen were precious stones representing the Shevatim – the Tribes of Israel. The Choshen had a unique function. Questions could be posed to the Kohen Gadol. He would respond by consulting the Choshen. Maimonides describes this process based upon the comments of Talmud. The proposed question would be brought to the Kohen Gadol. He would immediately be overcome with the spirit of prophecy. The Kohen Gadol would look at the Choshen. The response would be transmitted to him in a prophetic vision. The answer was expressed through the illumination of the letters engraved upon the stones of the Breast-plate.[1]

What type of questions could be addressed to the Choshen? In the Prophets we find that the Choshen was consulted on national issues. A king might refer to the Choshen for guidance

regarding a military campaign. However, Rashi comments in Tractate Eruvin that questions of halachah were not addressed in this manner. This limitation upon the use of the Choshen reflects an important principle of the Torah. Prophecy cannot be used to resolve issues of halachah. Such questions are the responsibility of the Sages and the courts. They must address these issues using the standards of halachah and their own intellects.

Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel makes an amazing comment that seems to contradict this principle. In our pasuk, The Choshen is referred to as the Breast-plate of Judgment. What is the relationship between the Choshen and judgment? Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel explains that the Choshen could be consulted over legal issues! This seems to contradict the principle that issues of halachah cannot be resolved through prophecy.

A similar contradiction is suggested by the last mishna in Tractate Edyot. Our Sages teach us that the Messianic era will be preceded by the reappearance of, Eliyahu, the prophet. The

mishna explains that Eliyahu will help prepare the path for the Moshiach. Raban Yochanan ben Zakai posits that one of Eliyahu's functions will be to clarify issues of lineage. Maimonides explains the meaning of this statement. Through prophecy, Eliyahu will identify those individuals who have become completely alienated from their Jewish roots. They will be welcomed back into Bnai Yisrael. In addition, impostors whose lineage is imperfect will be identified and excluded from the Jewish people. This would seem to be another example of prophecy used as a means to resolve an issue of halachah.

Rav Tzvi Hirsch Chayutz Zt"l, based upon a careful analysis of Maimonides' comments, offers a brilliant response. He explains that the limitation of prophecy as a means of resolving questions of halachah needs to be more fully understood. This limitation excludes prophecy from being used to determine the proper



formulation of the law. For example, in order for a person to be punished by the courts for eating a prohibited substance, a minimum quantity must be ingested. Assume a person consumes less than this amount. Certainly, the person cannot be punished by the courts. But is this activity included in the Torah prohibition or is the consumption prohibited by

only an injunction of the Sages? This issue is disputed by Rebbe Yochanan and Rebbe Shimon ben Lakish. The dispute revolves around the formulation of the Torah prohibition. Such an issue cannot be resolved through prophecy.

Sometimes a question of halachah develops in a case in which the formulation of the law is clear but the facts of the case are unknown. The questions of lineage to be resolved by Eliyahu are an example of this type of case. The laws governing lineage are not in question. Their formulation is known. However, the application of these laws is hindered by our ignorance of the actual lineage of the individual.

Rav Chayutz suggests that prophecy is not excluded as a means for resolving these factual questions. This explains the mishna in Tractate Edyot. Eliyahu, the prophet, will not resolve issues of lineage through altering the formulation of the law. This would indeed constitute a violation of the principle excluding prophecy from matters of halachah. Eliyahu will deal

(continued on next page)

with factual issues. He will divine the true family history of the individual and determine the true facts in the case. This approach can also explain the comments of Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel. There is a place in halachah for prophecy and the Choshen. This is the area identified by Rav Chayutz. Questions which are factual and not related to the formulation of the halachah could be referred to the Choshen.

The Function of the Bells that Adorned the Jacket of the Kohen Gadol

And it shall be upon Aharon when he serves. And its sound will be heard when he comes to the sanctuary before Hashem, and when he goes out, he shall not die. (Shemot 28:35)

Our pasuk discusses the jacket worn by the Kohen Gadol. This jacket is of unusual design. A series of gold bells hang from the jacket. What was the purpose of these bells? Most of the commentaries agree that our pasuk is addressing this question. However, they differ on the answer the passage is providing.

Nachmanides comments that the bells announce the Kohen Gadol's entry and exit from the sanctuary. Why is this notice required? Nachmanides explains that it is inappropriate to enter the presence of the King without announcing oneself. It is also disrespectful to leave the King's presence without first providing notice. The sanctuary must be treated with the same respect that is accorded a human king. Therefore, his entry and egress from the sanctuary must be announced by the sounding of the bells affixed to the Kohen Gadol's jacket.[2]

Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra takes a very different approach to explaining our pasuk. He suggests that the proper translation of the pasuk is that "his – the Kohen Gadol's – voice will be heard when he comes to the sanctuary before Hashem." In other words his prayer and petitions will be heard by Hashem. According to Ibn Ezra, the bells, as well as the other garments, are designed to distinguish the Kohen Gadol from the other kohanim. Through wearing his special vestments, the Kohen Gadol distinguishes himself as the leader of the kohanim and the people. Because he represents the entire nation, the prayers Kohen Gadol have special significance. The passage assures that when the

Kohen Gadol is adorned in the vestments of his office and is acting as his people's representative, then his sincere prayers will be heard.[3]

Gershonides offers a unique approach to explaining the bells of the jacket and the meaning of our passage. He explains that the Kohen Gadol's garments are not merely designed for visual beauty. These vestments also communicate important ideas. These various messages motivate the Kohen Gadol to concentrate exclusively on his spiritual mission. For example, the Choshen – the breastplate – worn by the Kohen Gadol includes a series of stones. Engraved on these stones are the names of the Shevatim – the Tribes of Israel. The Choshen conveys to and reminds the Kohen Gadol that he represents the entire nation. However, these various messages can only be communicated to the Kohen Gadol when he is aware of his special vestments. His attention must be drawn to them. The bells call the Kohen Gadol's attention to his garments. This, in turn, allows the vestments to convey their messages to him. Based on this interpretation of the bells, Gershonides explains our passage. The Kohen Gadol hears the ringing of bells adorning his vestments. This focuses his attention upon his garments and their special messages. His focus on these messages raises him to an elevated spiritual plane. As a result of his spiritual ascent, Hashem hears his voice and prayers.[4]

It is noteworthy that Ibn Ezra's interpretation of the bells is consistent with his overall perspective on the vestments of the Kohen Gadol. Ibn Ezra maintains that the garments of the kohanim are designed to bestow honor and glory upon them. He interprets the bells as one of the elements of the vestments that distinguish the Kohen Gadol.

Nachmanides contends that the vestments are designed to glorify Hashem. His understanding of the bells is consistent with this perspective. He explains that the bells are required in order to show proper reverence when entering before Hashem and leaving His presence.

Gershonides' understand-

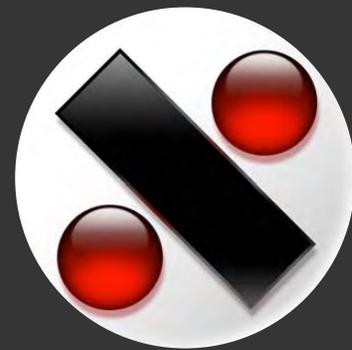
ing of the bells is somewhat unique. He contends that the vestments are designed to communicate to the Kohen Gadol. The bells facilitate this communication. They focus the Kohen Gadol's attention of the garments. The bells are not a fundamental element of the vestments. They do not communicate any idea. However, they enhance the performance of the other vestments. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Klai HaMikdash 10:11.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 28:35.

[3] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Abbreviated Commentary on Sefer Shemot, 28:35.

[4] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), p 382.



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Holidays



the Purim Story

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

King Achashverosh ruled in Shushan, with his reign extending over 127 provinces. He created a lavish banquet lasting 180 days. Tapestries of white, turquoise and purple hung from pillars of marble. Variegated marble paved paths lined with beds of gold and silver. The king decreed that wine should be older than the guest who imbibed it. For this ploy, I give credit to the king. I wondered why he wished this to be. Certainly, any ruler's position is in constant jeopardy: on the one hand, you must placate your viceroys and ministers to remain popular and in power. On the other hand, a leader's firm hand must be displayed. Aged wine was a solution: The king treated his guests with honor by providing wine older than themselves, a respectful drink, securing his popularity. But he also kept his officers humble - by implication the king said, "This wine was around long before you." Reminding one of a time when he was not yet around is quite humbling, and an affective maneuver to keep subjects in check.

The Celebration

The king was celebrating his faulty calculation that redemption would not occur for the Jews. His outright denial was seen in his use of the Temple's vessels for his haughty affair. Rabbi Yossi son of Chanina commented that the king dressed in the High Priest's clothing during this affair. (Talmud Megilla, 12a) This was a further extension of his denial, as if to say that the institution of the High Priest was nonsense, and that King Achashverosh better deserved this clothing. It is understood that one leader - Achashverosh - would be jealous of another, the High Priest. (The Rabbis teach that one tradesman is always jealous of another in his field.) Thus, the king jealously denied any honor due to the High Priest by donning his garments. The Talmud teaches that the king was equally anti-Semitic as was Haman. For when Haman later offered to pay for a war against the Jews, the

king told Haman to keep his money - the king covered the war's expense. But this very feast celebrating the lack of truth to the Jews' salvation is itself openly anti-Semitic.

Most people view Haman alone as the villain of the Purim story. However, we see clearly that the king was equally anti-Semitic. Keep this idea in mind, for it returns as a pivotal piece of information regarding another central character.

Exchanging Queens

During his feast, the king boasted that his Chaldean wife Vashti surpassed the beauty of other women. He demanded her to appear before him and other officials naked. She refused. Haman the wicked suggested she be killed for such an insult to the king, and this was so. An interesting metaphor is found in Talmud Megilla 12b explaining why Vashti refused, "Gabriel came and attached a tail to her."

A psychologically healthy individual does not desire to face his instinctual side; nudity exposes a purely animalistic aspect of man.. We learn that Queen Vashti tormented the Jewish women by forcing them to work in the nude. (The Talmud says Vashti received payment, measure for measure; she abused others with nudity, so she too was afflicted in this measure.) So we learn that Vashti was a friend to nudity. Why then did she refuse to come unclothed?

Vashti desired to expose herself when summoned by Achashverosh. But the Talmud states she didn't, as "Gabriel came and attached a tail to her". What does this mean? What is a "tail"? Why this organ? A tail is the one organ possessed by animals and not man. A tail is definitively "animal", as opposed to any other organ. "Tail" symbolizes Vashti's own instincts. Vashti was normally inclined towards sensuality and nudity, as seen by her working of nude women. But Divine intervention strengthened her ego above her lusts in this one instance. Due to Divine intervention - Gabriel - Vashti did not wish to show her "tail", admitting her animalistic side. We learn that Vashti's ego - her dignity - won out this time, and did not surpass her lusts.

Man's ego will normally sway his decisions more than his instinctual need for gratification. But Vashti's self-image was less important to her, than was her desire to act lustfully. We understand Achashverosh's selection of her as a marriage partner. These two people both enjoyed the life of sensuality, and physical pleasures. The last few words on Megilla 12a state, "He with large pumpkins, and she with small pumpkins." Meaning, they both desired similar "currency", i.e., immoral behavior.

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The statement, “Gabriel came and attached a tail to her”, indicates that Vashti’s disappearance was essential to the Jews’ salvation. Otherwise, a Divine act of God sending Gabriel to intervene would not be required.

Salvation Already in Place

Along with killing Vashti, Haman advised that a letter be issued stating that unlike Vashti’s opposition displayed, a man is to be the ruler of his house. When received by the townspeople, they disregarded the king’s letter as they viewed it as foolish. The Talmud states that due to the absurdity of this first letter demanding domestic, male domination, the townspeople also disregarded the second letter calling for the destruction of the Jews: “Were it not for the first letter, not a remnant of the Jews would be left.” (Megilla 12b) Rashi states that since the people dismissed the king as foolish based on the first letter, they did not attack the Jews until the day commanded. Had they never viewed the king as a fool, they would have preempted the verdict of annihilation, and killed the Jews sooner. We now realize something: Haman’s second letter – his advice to annihilate the Jews – was actually countered by his first letter. This is consistent with the previous statement that God never intended to annihilate the Jews, only to scare them into repentance. That is, even before the second “deadly” letter, a prior letter conveying the king’s foolishness already set the groundwork to save the Jews. Thus, God’s salvation was part of the plan first, meaning, this salvation was primary. Only after the salvation was in place, did He allow the apparent threat to enter the stage.

After the death sentence of Vashti, a new queen was sought. This now paved the way for Esther to be placed in the palace as queen, which occurred soon afterwards. Later, after Esther’s appointment as queen, Mordechai overheard a discussion between two men plotting the king’s assassination. They spoke in a foreign language, but as an adviser, Mordechai knew their language. Mordechai informed Esther to warn the king. The matter was investigated, and the would-be assassins were killed.

Haman’s Ego – His Downfall

Afterwards, Haman was elevated in position. He moved the king to agree to a decree that he be bowed to. When confronted with Haman’s decree to prostrate before him, all obeyed, all but Mordechai the pious. Haman was filled with rage at Mordechai for his violation, and Haman conjured charges against Mordechai, then against the rabbis, and finally he planned to annihilate the

Jews as a whole. Letters were sent throughout the kingdom to this effect. Mordechai responded by wearing sackcloth, mourning this fate, and praying for God’s salvation.

Mordechai’s Declaration

We learn that Mordechai joined the exiled Jews in Shushan of his own will – he was not forced to be there. This may explain his overt opposition to Haman. Mordechai’s refusal to prostrate to Haman was not only correct in its own right, but it also opposed the very flaw of the Jews. Mordechai made a public statement that bowing is idolatrous, as Haman made himself as an object of worship. (Megilla 19a) His refusal would awake the Jews to their flaw. It may very well be that Mordechai understood the flaw of that generation and therefore chose to move them to repentance with such an overt repudiation of idolatry.

We find more on this topic in the Talmud: The students of Rabbi Shimone bar Yochai asked him why the Jews deserved extermination. It could not be due to their participation in the feast of that wicked man Achashverosh. For if this were the reason, we would find no just reason why Jews who did not attend were also subject to death. Rabbi Shimone bar Yochai concluded that the Jews deserved punishment because earlier, they had prostrated themselves before Nevuchadnetzar’s idol. However, the Talmud concludes that as the Jews only prostrated out of fear, and not based on any conviction in the idol, God too was not going to truly exterminate the Jews, but He desired merely to instill fear in them. (Megilla 12a) We thereby learn that it is a severe crime to recognize idolatry in this fashion, even outwardly. We also learn that Mordechai was correct to oppose idolatry, even though his act would result in such a threat.

Esther’s Intervention

Haman succeeded at convincing the king to annihilate the Jews. Mordechai communicated to Esther that she must intervene, using her position to save the Jews. She was reluctant at first, as one who approaches the king uninvited faces death. Mordechai told her that if she did not act, salvation would come from another direction, and her house would not be saved. Esther agreed, but devised a cunning plan, in addition to her request that all Jews fast with her.

The Talmud says that on Esther’s approach to the king, she encountered a house of idolatry, at which moment, the Divine Presence removed from her. Why was this so? Why could the Divine

Presence no longer accompany her? It is not as though God’s presence is “there” with her. God has no relationship to the physical world, and therefore does He exist in physical space. Why should Esther’s proximity to a house of idols warrant God to remove His Shechina from her? Furthermore, if Esther deserved Divine Providence, and had no choice but to pass by this house of idols en route to the king, what fault is it of hers? There are no grounds to suggest any fault of Esther. In fact, God’s removal of His presence at this time is not a punishment.

Maharsha suggests that Esther initially viewed Haman alone as the sole villain. She did not realize that the king was also against the Jews. Now, as she was approaching the king, passing the house of idols, God’s Presence left. Perhaps God was teaching that, number one; the issue at hand is concerning idolatry, i.e., the sin of the Jews. That is why the Shechina – God’s Presence – left at the precise point she neared the house of idols, and not because if any infringement an idol can impose on God’s “whereabouts”. God causes His Shechina to leave Esther, thereby teaching that His Shechina left the Jews for this reason, i.e., their approach to idolatry by bowing to Nevuchadnetzar’s idol. God intended to alert Esther to information essential for her to calculate an intelligent plan.

As she was about to approach the king, if she was bereft of crucial information about who are her enemies, she could not effectuate a salvation...thus, lesson number two: God intended to indicate that the Jews’ enemies included another party – the king himself. Knowing this, Esther could now devise a plan, which would address all factors at play. God wished that Esther be successful. The Talmud records that when Esther ultimately raised her finger to point to the culprit, she pointed at the king, but God caused her finger to move towards Haman. Esther saw that the king was the ultimate enemy, but salvation could not arise if she accuses the only man who can save the Jews. God assisted again to save the Jews.

We learn that as Esther approached the king, God indicated new information essential for her success: the removal of His Shechina was due to the Jews’ idolatry, and their punishment was being directed by someone other than just Haman, i.e., the king. Now Esther was ready to devise a plan.

Esther enters to see the king, uncalled, risking her death. Rabbi Yochanan said three ministering angels were prepared for her at that moment: 1) her neck was lifted; 2) a thread of kindness was upon her, and 3) the king’s scepter extended to her. Esther was in day three of her fast and praying, and was drained physically and

(continued on next page)

(Megilla continued from page 1)

Holidays

emotionally. Either Esther transmitted these events, which transpired in the king's chambers, then they traveled down through the generations, or, the Rabbis concluded these events must have occurred. In either case, what do we learn?

By the mention of "ministering angels", we learn two things; 1) that God intervened, and 2) if He had not done so, disaster would strike. We learn that it was essential that Esther possess the physical strength to approach the king. Thus, her neck or head was lifted to address him. We may also add that it was essential that her composure was not lacking, as a king may not pay heed to one who is disheveled. One's head in a drooped state is not becoming, so the angels lifted her head high. Number two: It was essential that Esther find favor in the king's eyes, even though already his wife. It appears that marriage rights do not reserve the king's attention. His attention to his desires overshadowed his attention to Esther. Therefore, a renewed attraction was necessary at this point. Number three, when the king extended his scepter to be touched by those entering his chamber, Esther could not reach it, perhaps again out of weakness. So the angels assisted her here as well. God intervened in all three areas of need; Esther's composure, the king's feelings towards her, and politics, i.e., touching the scepter. Esther placed her life on the line, and God stepped in, sustaining Esther with a polished presentation before the king. We learn that the greatest plans still require God's assistance, and also, that God assists those who work in line with the Torah's philosophy, i.e., risking life to save the nation.

Esther's Plan

How did Esther orchestrate her plan? Esther invited the king and Haman to a private party. Once there, the king asked what her request was, and up to half the kingdom would be awarded her. She responded by requesting that both the king and Haman attend yet another party. What was Esther doing? Why didn't she speak up now, informing the king that Haman planned to annihilate her people? A Rabbi taught that Esther used her honed psychological knowledge to devise her plan. She felt, that had she directly accused Haman, the king's appointed officer, she would not necessarily meet with success, or salvation for the Jews. She planned to create suspicion in the king's mind, as the Talmud states. The king thought, "perhaps Haman is invited to this private party of three, as Esther and Haman are plotting against me. Is there no one who loves me who would not be silent in this matter?" That night the king could not sleep, and for good reason - Esther successfully aroused the king's suspicion. The king called for the Book



of Remembrance to be read, "Perhaps I have not properly rewarded those who love me, and they do not wish to inform me." It was found that Mordechai's previous favor of saving his life went without reward.

Divine Intervention

It was precisely at this moment, in the middle of the night, that Haman was in the king's courtyard. His approach in the middle of the night exposed his haste and desperation to hang Mordechai. The king just finished reading of Mordechai's kindness to him, and Haman wants to kill this loyal officer! Esther's plan is seen to be taking effect. She successfully drove the king to ponder Haman's business. While in this state of suspecting Haman, God orchestrates Haman's arrival. Be mindful too, that Mordechai only made it into the Book of Remembrance, as he was "fortunate" enough to be passing by, just when the two assassins were discussing their plot. We begin to appreciate that these events are not coincidences but God's hand at work. Since the king was still concerned if he never rewarded someone, and now learned that Mordechai went unpaid for saving his life, he ordered Haman to parade Mordechai around town on the king's horse in royal garb.

The underlying message here is that the king is no longer thrilled with Haman. He questioned Haman on how one deserving of the king's honor should be treated. Haman, thinking the king referred to him, exposed his desire for the crown - literally - by suggesting such an individual be paraded around on the king's horse in royal garb,

wearing the king's crown. Hearing this, the king observed Haman as simply out for himself, and not truly loyal. However, "loyalty" was the very issue the king was bothered by, meaning, who did he not recognize, and could possibly be withholding helpful information. This commanding of Haman to parade Mordechai through the streets is clearly the king's way of degrading Haman. Perhaps this is significance enough to make it into the Megilla, as it precipitates Haman's downfall. Here, the king first develops ill feelings towards Haman.

The Second Party

Now the king was bent on suspecting Haman - now was the time to accuse Haman. The Talmud states one reason Esther invited Haman to the second party was she knew the king to be fickle. She wished to have the king kill Haman while he was in that mindset. She therefore invited Haman to be on hand if she was successful at exposing Haman.

At the second party, the king again questioned Esther of her request. She finally accuses Haman. The king is angry, and storms out of the party. According to the Talmud, he gazes at trees being plucked out of the kingdom by ministering angels. The king demanded, "What are you doing?" The angels responded, "Haman ordered us to do this." This metaphor means that the king interpreted his kingdom - the trees - to be falling into Haman's hands. The king returns to the party, only to see Haman fallen onto Esther's bed. (Haman had been pleading for his life; he got up, and then fell down on her bed.) To the king, Haman's close proximity to Esther, on her bed, was a display of Haman seeking the throne. The king responded, "Will you

(continued on next page)

(Megilla continued from page 1)

Holidays

conquer the queen while I am yet in the house?" The Talmud again says that ministering angels were at work, this time, forcing Haman onto the queen's bed. How do we understand this metaphor of these angels?

It would appear that once Esther accused Haman, all the king had on his mind was the fear that all leaders have: a close supporter is really seeking the throne. Looking at "trees being plucked" means the king was now viewing his kingdom (trees) as being destroyed. The king began interpreting all events as Haman's usurping of his throne. Once the king was this suspicious of Haman, and then that suspicion was confirmed by Haman's desire to kill the loyal Mordechai, the king needed nothing else but his own paranoia to interpret matters against Haman. What would be conclusive? A clear demonstration. This was also afforded to the king in the form of Haman's position, falling onto the queen's bed! This too was generated by God's intervention, i.e., the angels. In both cases, "angels" refer to some force, physical or psychological, which influenced the king.

At this point, Charvona, a Haman supporter, saw Haman's impending doom and switched sides from Haman to Mordechai. He was an opportunist, also out to save his neck. Charvona suggested hanging Haman on the very gallows built by Haman for Mordechai. Haman was hung, and Mordechai was elevated in status. The Jews were then victorious over their enemies, and Purim was instituted as a holiday for generations.

Reaccepting the Torah

The Jews arose and reaccepted the Torah out of a love, whereas Sinai was acceptance with some coercion. Seeing an undeniable revelation of God at Sinai, Torah acceptance carried with it some fear and coercion. However, when these Jews saw the brilliance demonstrated by Esther and Mordechai, and how God worked within their plan to save the Jews, the Jews now appreciated the Torah with no coercion. They saw a prime example of how using wisdom is the one path to the proper life, and that God does in fact intervene when one operates in this manner.

It is interesting to note that the initial cause for the tragedy of Purim was Mordechai's refusal to bow to Haman's idol. (Rashi and Ibn Ezra state Haman carried an idol.) This was the precise sin the Jews committed overtly that deserved this punishment. (Inwardly they did not commit idolatry) The very same institution - idolatry - acted as both the obligation for punishment (the Jews' prostration to idols) and the delivery of that punishment (Mordechai's refusal to bow enraged Haman to annihilate the Jews). Perhaps the identical nature of these two events displays God's hand in this matter.

In reviewing the personalities of the Megilla,

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Haman taught us that self-aggrandizement is fatal. His initial intolerance that one, single person would not recognize him drove him to seek permission from the king to murder Mordechai, leading to his downfall. Mordechai taught us that certain principles are worth sacrificing for, and he therefore did not bow to idols or Haman. And Esther taught us that with wisdom, a well-devised plan has the greatest hope of success, and God may intervene.

Omission of God's Name

One final question: What is the significance of God's name being omitted from the Megilla? We all know that this era was where God intervened, but behind the scenes. What demanded such a covert method of Divine intervention? In all other events, God's miracles are quite apparent; from the Ten Plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, to the sun and moon standing still, to the oil burning eight days on Chanukah...miracles are purposefully and definitively apparent. Why not during the Purim story?

We already mentioned that the Jews arose and reaccepted the Torah again. This is based on Esther 9:27. This acceptance was bereft of any Sinaic coercion. They truly appreciated the Torah system. Since Sinai was apparently lacking this unbiased devotion, perhaps God's purposeful covert methods during Purim were designed to allow such an appreciation to surface. The very words included in the Megilla that the Jews reaccepted the Torah are significant - they teach that this was essential. Therefore, we can suggest that to enable the Jews this opportunity, God minimized His presence, which allowed the Jews to focus instead on Esther and Mordechai, admiring how their lives, guided

by Torah wisdom, yielded remarkable results.

A Rabbi once taught: Drinking brings a man to a happy, uninhibited state of mind. Just as when in love, man is completely happy and exclusively bound up in that happiness, so too when he is drinking. In order to mimic the state of the Jews who were saved, who were euphoric in their love of the Torah system and wisdom as exemplified by Mordechai and Esther, we drink more than our usual quantity to reach this blissful state of mind. Our drinking today enables that feeling when God rendered this great good upon us. We often hear the term "drunk with love". This shows that man does equate these two emotional states.

So drink, not to engage in drinking, but to experience a gladness, which commemorates the Jews' gladness of old, marveling at the benefit of a true Torah existence.

May our continued attachment to Torah and mitzvot bring us all to this state where we too arise and reaccept the Torah, not reminiscent of the coerced feelings we still carry from day school, but an acceptance based on understanding and appreciation. And the only way to obtain such appreciation is through study. Let Purim this year instill in us all a renewed commitment to minimizing our attention to distractions, entertainments, and wealth, redirecting our time to the one involvement God desires we focus on, over all else; Torah study and teaching. Unlike the false arguments presented to us by society in their 9-to-5 work ethic praising wealth and success over all else...Torah study will truly avail you to the most enjoyable life, the life outlined by God and the Rabbis. If the wisest of men followed this philosophy, they must know better. A happy Purim to all. ■

(Esther continued from page 1)

Holidays

After this raw display of emotion, she proceeds to clarify her request:

“And she said: ‘If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews that are in all the king’s provinces. For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?’ (8:5-6)”

Clearly, her request was for Achashverosh to recall the messengers with Haman’s edict, thereby ensuring the Jews would be saved. His response was as follows:

“Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew: ‘Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and him they have hanged upon the gallows, because he laid his hand upon the Jews. Write ye also concerning the Jews, as it liketh you, in the king’s name, and seal it with the king’s ring; for the writing which is written in the king’s name, and sealed with the king’s ring, may no man reverse (8:7-8)”

At first glance, one can easily see the change in Esther’s demeanor. Whereas the plan’s initial phase to get rid of Haman was carried out confidently, strategically and without pleas for mercy, now, both in her pleading with Achashverosh as well as the passionate nature of her plea, she has quite transformed her approach. Why this change? But there is a more subtle question that requires an explanation. Up to this point, Esther had been able to manage events in a fairly precise way. And yet here she seemingly planned out a display of pleading, adding weight to her one request—that the king reverse the edict. She plays her hand and Achashverosh does not take the bait. He refuses to accede to her request, rather offering a different solution to the problem. There could be no reversal of the edict. Instead, he would allow for another edict to be written, one that would negate the effects of the first. Did Esther anticipate this response? Did she err in her initial assessment of the situation? What was her plan then? Furthermore, it was common knowledge that the king could/would never reverse his edict once it was written (see Malbim 8:..). Didn’t Esther know this? And why then does Achashverosh allow for a new edict to be written?

To understand these events, we must look to the beginning of the megilla. We enter the scene of a huge party, with the excesses expected in a society dominated by hedonism. Achashverosh summons Vashti to show her off, and she ostensibly refuses. His reaction was impulsive, his rage guiding his thought process--“and his anger burned in him (1:12)” He summons his advisers, unsure of how to proceed. His ego could not tolerate such an affront by Vashti, but he could not get rid of her simply due to an embarrassing squabble. She came from royalty, while he essentially got lucky in becoming king. His officers, his subjects, his kingdom - they would not tolerate a decision simply based on an impulsive reaction. Memuchan (Haman) recognizes the conflict overcoming him and offers an ingenious solution (the merits of this solution are for a different discussion). Rather than allow the episode to be viewed as domestic strife, he changes it into a sociological epidemic, wherein if the king allowed this type of behavior, it would be condoned by all. This was no longer a simple fight between husband and wife. This was a national crisis, where the very nature of how men and women relate to each other was at stake. The key here is that rather than trying to counsel Achashverosh to reverse his initial decision, he caters to his ego in a way that earns him a promotion.

With this in mind, we can now take a look at how events unfolded, and what Esther’s plan was.

As we all know, after Esther’s accusations against Haman, and after returning to his room to see Haman kneeling before Esther, Achashverosh cries out in rage: “Will he even force the queen before me in the house?” Haman is then hung, which settles his anger. Immediately, “on that day,” the megilla tells us that Achashverosh gave Haman’s ring to Mordechai, bestowing Haman’s position onto him. Rather than simply kill Haman, Achashverosh eradicates his existence by having Mordechai replace him. Yet with this action came a problem.

Esther realized that Achashverosh was now presented with another seemingly intractable conflict. He had acted impulsively again, killing Haman and turning over his position to Mordechai. The source of this was a belief that Haman had endeavored to usurp him and take his wife. The fate of the Jews was not his primary concern. Having Mordechai as his trusted adviser, while at the same time allowing

for the people of his kingdom to rise up and kill the Jews would make him appear to seem grossly inconsistent. How could his wife and his new most prominent adviser stand aside and watch their people be annihilated? Esther realized this. First, as she pleads with Achashverosh, she notes that Haman alone was responsible for this evil plan--“to put away the evil that Haman the Agagite” – assuring Achashverosh that she found no culpability in his actions. She resorts to an emotional appeal, attempting to influence Achashverosh out of guilt, appealing to that impulsive nature he was known for. But she knew he could never agree to reverse the edict. It would be an affront to his status and position. To go back on his word would present a challenge to his misguided view of himself. At the same time, she realized it would be crucial in this instance that Achashverosh think of the plan himself, that he be the source of the solution. If she was responsible for the plan to save the Jews, people would perceive him much like he was perceived in the time of Vashti - he was king in name only. Furthermore, he would come one day to resent her for using the power of guilt to sway his thinking. So Esther presented Achashverosh with two options – retract his edict out of allegiance to Esther, or present an alternative of his own thinking. In essence, she pushed him into the second position. The Vilna Gaon () shrewdly points out that he calls in both Esther and Mordechai after Esther’s appeal. He explains that Achashverosh did so because he did not want to hear Esther cry even more when he would tell her he would not revoke his edict. The Vilna Gaon is telling us that he did not want this decision to be viewed as impulsive, a product of a crying queen. He first responds “Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman...” reviewing the dilemma he faced. Rather than give in to his impulses, he devises a new plan, one that would be politically sound and would stand to strengthen his image. It would be his idea alone, and he would be the one to resolve this conflict. He would come out of this as a respected king, a strong leader, his ego intact. And Esther would have ensured the safety of the Jewish people.

With this, we see how the strategic maneuvering of Esther, aided by Mordechai, was so successful. It was the result of blind reliance on Hashem or the might of an army. Rather, Esther saw in Achashverosh’s personality a means to manipulate his thinking, to serve his ego while fulfilling her purposes. In that, we can understand her brilliance and the chachma to which we owe our survival. ■

the final Bracha on Megilla

RABBI DR. DARREL GINSBERG

With Purim this weekend, we begin to prepare for the reading of Megillas Esther, the recounting of the events surrounding our potential demise at the hands of Haman and our subsequent redemption from this fate. The reading of the megillah is the precursor to what is perhaps one of the most joyous holidays of the year, an expression of happiness that emerges once one completes this reading. Chazal recognized this transition, as seen in the bracha recited at the conclusion of the megillah.

The bracha, as written in the Talmud (Megilla 21b), is as follows:

“Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe who espoused our quarrel and vindicated our cause and executed our vengeance and punished our adversaries for us and visited retribution on all the enemies of our soul. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who avenges Israel on all their enemies.”

The Talmud then explains that according to Raba, the bracha should end with “The God who saves (hamoshiyah).” R Papa concludes that both endings, “who avenges...” and “The God who saves”, are combined to conclude the bracha, which is the current text today.

There are a number of issues regarding this bracha that should be addressed. For example, what is the purpose of this bracha? Also, how does one understand the argument as to which ending should be used?

In order to understand the nature of the bracha, it might help to understand its halachic construct. Both the Ran (Megilla 12a) and the Ritva (Megilla 21b), among other Rishonim, question why this bracha starts with “baruch ata...” Typically, a concluding bracha in this context would not have any preface. It would be treated like the concluding bracha in hallel, for example, which has no introductory “baruch”; it starts with “yehallelucha.” Furthermore, it would be difficult to argue that the reading of the megillah itself constitutes a break, or hefsek, in between the opening and concluding brachos. The opening brachos were specifically set up for the actual

reading of the megilla, and one would therefore assume the final bracha is the postscript on the previous reading. If that was the case, there would, again, be no need for the preface of “baruch ata...” The answer given is that this bracha was not instituted on the reading of the megilla, but rather is a separate bracha of praise and gratitude for the miracle of Purim.

Of course, one could well ask, “If the bracha is not on the megillah reading itself, is it just a coincidence that it is recited immediately after completing the reading of the megillah?” The answer may lie in the unique phenomenon of Purim.

The story of Purim is one that is completely separated from all other yomim tovim that we celebrate. On the shalosh regalim, we rejoice and reflect on the manifestation of God’s hashgacha, whether it be through the event at Sinai, the redemption from Egypt, or the protection offered to the nation as they wandered through the desert. We analyze, study and reflect on these incredible episodes in our history. On Chanukah, the light of the candle burns brightly, a natural publication of the miracle surrounding the menorah and the saving of Bnai Yisrael from calamity. We use the miraculous nature of all these events as a vehicle to a greater understanding of God’s infinite chachma and His relationship to us and the universe. Yet on Purim, as we all know, there is no reference to God at all in the megillah. The hashgacha that is so vividly apparent in all the other yomim tovim is aptly worded as “subtle” in the megillah. Such an omission assists in our ability to focus on the brilliance of Mordechai and Esther, as they used their knowledge and intuition to save the Jewish people. At the same time, one sees God’s guidance throughout, with Mordechai overhearing the guards at the exact moment of their plot, or Haman showing up at the king’s palace on that specific, monumental night. With the completion of this story, a person should rightly be overcome. In this instance, there was a combination of the ingenuity of Mordechai and Esther with God’s



control of the minutiae of the cause and effects. The internalization of this story should naturally bring someone to express amazement at God’s ways.

This concept is not unique to Purim. On Pesach, we engage in learning and analyzing the events of our redemption from Egypt. As we near the end of the magid portion, we recite the following: “Thus it is our duty to thank, to laud, to praise, to glorify, to exalt, to adore, to bless, to elevate and to honor the One who did all these miracles for our fathers and for us...” After thoroughly contemplating and internalizing that which we learned from the magid, this bracha expresses the praise and gratitude we give to God for that which God has done for us. We then begin to recite hallel, the objective expression of these thoughts. So too with megillah. Chazal recognized this natural desire emerging from hearing the story of Purim, and objectified it in the bracha they wrote. The bracha speaks of God’s actions to help safeguard the nation, a general collection of the different means and methods He uses. There is no mention of the miraculous. In fact, it is impossible to identify or pinpoint the exact moment where God intervenes as cited in the bracha, much like in the megillah. Nonetheless, the megillah clearly demonstrates His role, and for that, we offer our praise and gratitude.

The argument about which ending to use also requires an explanation. It could be that the original ending introduced by the Talmud focuses us on the mechanism of the intervention. In other words, God exacting vengeance was directly apparent in the events leading to the Jews’ attack on their enemies. As Haman’s plan fell apart, and as the chips fell into place, one could see God guiding the events. Therefore, the ending correctly emphasizes the reality of God’s intervention, an appropriate conclusion. On the other hand, there is the proposed ending of God as savior. This would seem to emphasize the result of the miracle of Purim. It was, of course, critical to the Jewish people to have Haman and their other enemies be destroyed. However, there has to be an objective to these actions, a goal beyond simply saving lives. Yeshuah refers to that objective, taking a person from a state of physical, psychological and ideological peril, and bringing him forth to be a true Eved Hashem. The Talmud concludes that these concepts are both included in the bracha. These two ideas successfully complement each other, directing the one who recites it to truly appreciate the greatness of God.

With this in mind, one can hope to capture the essence of the megilla. Rather than viewed as a story, it is a revelation to mankind that the miraculous need not be apparent or even evident. And though it was the chachma and courage of Mordechai and Esther that caused the downfall of Haman, it is God’s hashgacha that was, and always will be, responsible for the defeat of our enemies and our ultimate salvation. ■



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